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ABSTRACT

Strategic planning ties an institution's mission to its budgeting process, thus coordinating institutional planning efforts in the face of environmental uncertainty. This paper discusses how schools must arrange those systems that determine how strategies will be aligned with the schools' underlying mission and core values. The text focuses on the efforts of one moderately-sized school district to realign its strategy-making, system development, and structure building with its underlying mission and, in the process, provide the district with more inclusive planning and more responsive and creative leadership. The school district serves 2,200 students in a university town of 8,000 permanent residents. From 1992 to 1997 the district engaged in strategic planning. Twenty-nine administrators, teachers, and community representatives gathered for a 1-day retreat and created the district's mission statement. They then derived a statement of beliefs they felt undergirded the mission statement and a set of parameters within which the district should function. To move toward the objectives, the operational structure of the district underwent a series of changes, especially to solidify governance in order to ensure coordination and efficiency in district decision-making. Other parts of the process are reported. (Contains 16 references and 2 figures.) (RJM)

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Changing Our Ways: Realigning Strategy, Structure, and Systems with Mission

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Changing Our Ways: Realigning Strategy, Structure, and Systems with Mission

"At a gut level, we know that much more goes into the process of keeping a large organization vital and responsive than the policy statements, new strategies, plans, budgets, and organization charts can possibly depict. All too often we behave as though we don't know it. If we want to change, we fiddle with the strategy. Or we change the structure. Perhaps the time has come to change our ways" (Peters & Waterman, 1982, p.3).

School districts, over time, have followed the American organizational tradition—from one-room operations to multifaceted bureaucracies in search of control, coordination, and cooperation among competing entities. The guiding mechanism chosen by many—strategic planning. The purpose of strategic planning is to tie the institution's mission to its budgeting process in order to gain coordination across institutional planning efforts in the face of environmental uncertainty.

'Changing our ways' means that schools must not only revisit their basic mission, or reason why they exist, in terms of strategy (what districts want to do). But, they must also seek to bring the systems (processes) that determine how their strategies will be implemented and the structures, which dictate who will do the implementing and where they will do it, into full alignment with their underlying mission and core values.

Instead, institutions make purposeful choices that are informed by historical cause and effect patterns of action. These choices (typically in the form of goals and objectives) are reasonable responses to externally generated challenges. School leaders play a crucial role in strategic planning. They seek more employee (in particular, faculty and staff) involvement in decision making especially when decisions affect internal activities. Leaders encourage this

participation by inviting faculty and staff to take risks and by promoting open communication. Leaders do, however, maintain a firm hand in determining institutional direction and in making institutional decisions that directly impact how the organization interacts with its external environment (Quinn, Mintzberg & James, 1988).

Strategic planning provides institutions with procedural road maps by lending structure to the decision making process or system. Because turmoil galvanizes action, the overriding concern of strategic planning lies in adapting to the external environment in order to more efficiently allocate the organization's resources to ensure organizational well-being. Concerns arise when planning remains balkanized because few important problems confine themselves to one unit, department, school or even district. Instead, they spill over both structural and imaginary walls of organizational compartmentalization and muddy the treacherous waters of institutional decision making. Strategic planning, especially when divorced from the everyday workings of the organization's mind—its employees—cannot guarantee success in either avoiding the slippery abyss of environmental pitfalls or surmounting its rugged peaks of opportunity (Koteen, 1989; Ziegenfuss, 1989; Bryson, 1988; Steiner, 1979).

School districts often either fail to move beyond the bureaucratic directives that reinforce strategic planning and toward greater shared decision-making, or they move directly to sharing decisions by adding great hordes of participants and systems (processes and procedures) and structures (administrative units) to accommodate them. In the first instance, institutional control remains firmly entrenched in time-tested hierarchical structures and routines. Schools remain bound by the confines of their environments and mired in decision making processes that limit organizational agility. As a consequence, traditional guidelines, arrived at through conventional

problem-solving procedures, continue to define what is important to the organization, and improving quality many times becomes synonymous with concentrating on existing techniques, practices and processes (Galbraith, Lawler & Associates, 1993; Morgan, 1986). In the second, coordination becomes impossible, decision making convoluted, disjointed, and disconnected from the organization's mission, and control rapidly passes to those with the greatest vested interests, most political clout, or loudest voices.

Being budget-bound in an economically stringent environment complicates matters further for school districts. It makes it difficult to abandon practices and ideas whose times have passed. In effect, organizations remain committed to and become trapped by "inherently unproductive efforts" (Drucker, 1973). A kind of strategic blindness sets in and pushes the institution beyond the point of efficiency and into an anorexic state where implementation failures and lost opportunities sap the organization of its ability to be effective (Kanter, 1989). In an era where a school's ability to serve its students and society's needs may well be defined by its ability to learn and then capitalize on what it learns, the focus must shift from problem solving (where the problems get defined by those who are the most brazen) to raising possibilities in a systematic and systemic manner.

This paper examines the efforts of one moderately sized school district to realign its strategy making, system development, and structure building with its underlying mission and in the process provide the district with more inclusive planning and more responsive and creative leadership.

The Case of Grainville School District

Grainville School District serves 2,200 students in a university town of 8, 000 permanent residents. The district consists of one high school (562 students), one midlle school (488 students), and three elementary schools (955 students). The closest city of 100,000 residents or more is 75 miles away. Prior to a five-year strategic planning effort, the school district was governed and administered by a district superintendent who reported directly to the school board, an associate superintendent, and individual principals at the building-level. District direction was set by the school board.

The Five Year Strategic Planning Process

From 1992 to 1997, Grainville School District engaged in strategic planning. A group of twenty-nine district administrators and teachers and community representatives, who agreed to take on the five-year commitment (a sunset clause was written into the plan), gathered together for a one-day retreat. They began by creating the district's mission statement, and from that derived a statement of beliefs they felt undergirded it and a set of parameters within which the district should function. From the beginning of its five-year strategic planning exercise, district members grounded their work in one fundamental belief—that the district exists to "teach all students [certain] essential skills and to value learning." As a group they arrived at four, overall objectives that would guide the district during the next five years. The group then divided itself into seven action teams, each one focusing on a distinct strategy calculated to move the district toward the fulfillment of its four objectives. Each subsequent the year, the group met to report on the progress made during the previous year. Over the course of the five years, the four objectives

were essentially met.

To effectively move toward the objectives and strategies outlined by the district's plan, the operational structure of the district, itself, underwent a series of changes. Over the course of the planning process, the strategic planning group became involved in setting district direction; and as goals and objectives were identified, groups of interested parties formed and administrative units were added to accommodate each new direction. For instance, when curriculum and instructional improvement and faculty development became the focus, a new oversight committee, the Curriculum and Instructional Learning Council (CILC) came into being. This council consists of seven teachers, some of whom serve as grade level (currently, grade band) chairs, and the director of instructional support (DIS). This particular position was included at the central administration level to help coordinate the CILC's efforts and to coordinate technical planning (the use of and accessibility to computers). The DIS carried out these duties independently of each other. In addition, the district established the Curriculum Advisory Council (CAC) to serve as a regulatory agent that linked the CILC to the school board. This group consists of parents, a librarian, curriculum chairs, the DIS, the associate superintendent, the superintendent, and several elementary and secondary principals.

Part way into the five-year planning process, state mandated site-based councils attached to each school came into existence. The role these councils play continues to be ill-defined and unclear but in most cases ties to other state-mandated programs. Most recently, the district has shifted away from grade levels to grade bands (K-4, 5-7, 8-10, and 11-12) to better accommodate state-mandated outcomes, the *Essential Academic Learnings*, and an accompanying assessment system.

Because the State of Washington is very concerned not only with learning effectiveness but with organizational efficiency, the district also began to pursue quality improvement efforts—bringing into existence still another advisory board. In addition, a facilities planning group, one concerned with budgeting, miscellaneous advisory boards, and school PTAs either strengthened already existing positions or forged new ones.

Finally, in part because of the sensitivity to multiple stakeholders that accompanies any movement toward continuous quality improvement, the district initiated what it terms the stakeholder process. This once-a-year occurrence affords individuals from the community-at-large the opportunity to help determine district goals for the following year. All ideas were gathered in town hall meetings by the superintendent who filtered, categorized, and prioritized them. This information was then presented to the 29-member strategic planning group at its annual one-day retreat. There, the information was distilled down into the district's strategies for the coming year. Besides this general source of community input, the district also had its share of special interest groups that lobbied for particular activities, most of which were extracurricular in nature, independently of the stakeholder process. (See Figure 1.)

The Misalignment of Structure, Strategy, & Systems

As a result of the gradual proliferation of administrative units with multiple but not always coordinated goals, objectives, and implementation plans, one of the 1996-97 goals for the district was to solidify governance in order to ensure coordination and efficiency in district decision making. District personnel sensed a need to coordinate planning efforts, simplify the organization's central structure, and find a way to more systematically deal with the increasing

amounts of input the district now received, and at the same time address the general concerns of parents, teachers, and community members.

When the fifth annual strategic planning meeting neared, administrators began considering what the role of the strategic planning group should be, if any, in the future; what to do with all the disconnected planning and administrative groups that the plan had given rise to over the past five years; and how to incorporate what the district had learned from the strategic planning process while at the same time streamlining its operations and decision making.

To this end, consultants, experienced in organizational planning and governance, met several times with district personnel before the strategic planning session. By doing so, they began to get a sense for the current organizational and planning dilemmas the district faced and for the direction in which they wished to move. Following these meetings the consultants led members of the strategic planning group through their final meeting, a two-day retreat, in April 1997. In accordance with the day's dialogue and follow-up meetings with district personnel, the following district changes were made following school board approval in January 1998. A new decision making body was formed; the strategic planning group decommissioned; technical planning was subsumed under the CILC; five administrative units, including the CILC, were subordinated to an existing leadership team, job description for members of all governing groups were defined; and the relationship between all groups clearly articulated. In all, five primary units remain—school board, stakeholder process, leadership team, site-based councils, and planning team. (See Figure 2.)

Redefining the Structure

The school board continues to ensure that the overall vision/mission for the district is met. The primary function of the stakeholder process is to generate new ideas. The process includes (on at least a yearly basis) input from students, the community-at-large, senior citizens, parents, teachers and certified staff, classified staff, and administrators. Input from all special interest groups now comes to the attention of the school district through the stakeholder process. The leadership team is responsible for the general operations of the District. It implements the goals and objectives set by a new planning team and consists of the superintendent, the associate superintendent, the director of instructional support and principals from each building. The CILC and fiscal, facilities, school-based planning, and student activities subunits report directly to the leadership team. Site-based councils provide input on *Essential Academic Learnings* (the state-mandated curriculum) implementation. Each council includes building-level administrators, teachers and parents and interfaces through the leadership team with the CILC, which is responsible for curriculum and professional development and is primarily made up of teachers representing the various grade bands (K to 4, 5 to 7, and so on).

Redefining the Planning System

The new planning team's purpose is two-fold. It focuses the district's efforts in the near future by setting short-term goals and objectives, and it provides the district with an ongoing sense of direction for the long-term future. Its twelve, voting members include the superintendent, the director of instructional support, two teachers (each from a different grade band), five site-council members (rotated every two (2) years, one from each school with

balanced perspectives by council member categories (community representative, parent, classified staff, certified staff, principal), two students, and one community member at-large. In addition, the team includes several ex officio members—one assistant superintendent (who will serve as the facilitator of the planning process), one school board member, one foundation board member, and district directors/ coordinators and city/university officials as needed.

Planning team responsibilities include: reviewing internally generated district data (i.e., exit surveys, graduation rates, *Essential Academic Learnings* assessments) yearly and conducting a formal analysis of both internal strengths and weaknesses and external opportunities and threats every two (2) to three (3) years. This analysis may entail the use of focus groups to generate data. The team also engages in the act of futuring or visioning for the future. Such activities require that planning team members think in new and creative ways as they pursue a long range plan for the district. And, it is charged with generating stakeholder input into goals and objectives of the district, engaging in short and intermediate range planning by setting goals and objectives for the district, and evaluating the planning process and outcomes.

Realigning Systems, Structure, and Strategy to Realize Mission

Experts in the field of organizational change and decision making have for years been giving essentially the same advice. As an organization's environment becomes more dynamic and unstable, as fiscal resources shrink or become constrained, as those who seek the organization's service become more demanding, less tolerant, and begin to look elsewhere for comparable or better service, the organization must pay closer attention to strategy (Hamel, 1998; Mintzberg, 1989; Peters & Waterman, 1982). The problem for many organizations lies in their propensity to

define strategy without reviewing the context of the organization's core mission and to concentrate on it to the exclusion of other significant influences, such as systems and structures spawned from their strategies, on organizational well-being. In a way, the very mechanisms—procedures and processes—that generated past success render the organization inflexible, less inventive, and less apt to embrace change.

Indeed, organizations equate change to tinkering with the content of strategy (Hamel, 1998). Schools are no exception to this rule. We hear of competency- and outcomes-based education; we think about assessment; we move from grade levels to grade bands and from class periods to course blocks. What school districts fail to examine and think seriously about are the ways in which strategies get made and the context within which they are constructed.

Mintzberg (1989) claims that strategy emerges. If this is true, then it emerges along a continuum from chaos to careful crafting, either of which school districts can ill-afford. In the one instance, there is no direction; and in the other, there is too much. Instead, they need creative order where strategy content, informed by context, emerges (Hamel, 1998). Grainville School District appears to be attempting to infuse the way they arrive at strategy with both. The stakeholder process shows great promise as a mechanism for gaining insights into, and an understanding of, district and community preconditions that must play a role in determining district strategy. Its new planning team adds purposeful structure and a system that holds the potential for providing order to district strategy making. In the first case, the district redefined strategy making as a pluralistic process, a "deeply participative undertaking" by adding new voices. In the second case, the district has begun to engage in new conversations that cut across usual internal and external organizational boundaries. When strategy making remains confined to

a select group of individuals, the opposite occurs. " The same people talk to the same people about the same issues . . . after a while, they can learn little new from each other" (Hamel, 1998, p.?). The use of both the stakeholder process and the planning team bring new perspectives and new passions to Grainville's strategy making. The combination has the potential to increase the district's ability to think creatively and strategize innovatively (Hamel 1998; Tierney, 1993; Senge, 1990).

At the same time, the district has signaled to its constituencies that district personnel must ultimately control strategy in terms of district structure and district systems. Indeed, trying to realize mission through strategy making without the structure, staff, systems, skills, and shared values to undergird it becomes a hollow and futile exercise (Peters & Waterman, 1982). Grainville seemed to recognize that increased input into the strategy making process required a change in district organizational design and governance. Indeed, that stakeholder concerns demanded a larger audience than the superintendent represented and that others needed to be involved in prioritizing and clarifying information this group provided to the district. The district also sensed that a new group, the planning team, one whose members represented multiple perspectives not just that of district administrators, would strengthen the district's ability to plan effectively.

Change or Chatter?

Has the Grainville School District changed its ways, or has it engaged in nothing more than a rhetorical exercise? It may be too early to tell, but it does appear that the district has taken the first important steps toward change. Whether the district can create and implement strategy

that moves it forward in a sea of change or whether, as an organization, the district will revert to old routines and comfortable habits is still to be seen. We suspect, however, that once the district has incorporated new voices into the decision making process and fully initiated its planning system that it will be difficult to reverse its course.

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FIGURE 1: GRAINVILLE SCHOOL DISTRICT PLANNING STRUCTURE & PROCESS PRIOR 1998

CENTRAL DISTRICT PLANNING UNITS	OTHER BOARDS & COUNCILS
Community Stakeholder Group	Site Councils
District Quality Improvement Council	Activity Advisory
Strategic Planning Group	Boosters
CILC/CAC	Education Foundation
Technical Planning	Library Advisory
Leadership Team	PTAs
School Board	Pullman Education Association
Budget Development Group	Categorical Program Boards (e.g., ESL)
Superintendent's Advisory Board	Grant Boards (e.g., Drug & Alcohol)

EXTERNAL INFLUENCES ON DISTRICT STRUCTURE & SYSTEMS

State Educational Support District
Superintendent of Public Instruction
Federal Legislation
State Legislation
City Legislation & Expectations
Grainville University Expectations
The Local Economy

FIGURE 2: GRAINVILLE SCHOOL DISTRICT RE-ORGANIZATION CHART